

## Quarantine by TheLostSister

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**Summary:**

May, 1984. Eleven gets sick and learns a new word. Hopper sets out to the store to pick her up some medicine and inadvertently catches the eye of someone who's been avoiding him for the past month.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

- For [DeutchRemy](#).

This is a reupload of a deleted fic only due to DeutchRemy's request lol! And sort of reworked (hope you still like it!) as a sequel to another fic so that I might get motivation to continue it???

Though it was the same 7:30 AM as every other day, Hopper's Tuesday morning alarm clock went off at a time that felt much too early. Without even opening his eyes, he sat up and fumbled for the clock on the side table at the end of his bed, smashing all the buttons on top to get it to stop.

He swung his legs over the side of his tiny bed and planted his feet on the floor. He rubbed at his far too tired eyes and stood up with a groan. The days somehow seemed to be getting longer and the nights much shorter. He'd been in a weird, almost depressive funk for the past month since the Chicago trip which likely wasn't helping that feeling.

As he took a step towards the bathroom, his foot got caught on something, tripping him and sending him stumbling towards the couch in attempt to avoid injuring the tiny human that he now noticed curled up under a blanket on the floor.

"What the hell? I just about crushed you kid. What are you doing on the floor?" Hopper demanded, now fully wide awake, his heart beating a little too fast from their near accident.

El didn't answer, and he reached for the lamp on the end table that he had just collided into.

He knelt down next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. She was curled up on her side facing his bed, and he noticed that she had been trembling ever so slightly.

“Did you have a bad dream?” he tried again, his tone a little bit gentler now.

He searched her face for blood that usually accompanied the *really* bad ones, the ones that actually led her to seek out and accept his company after she woke up. However, he was a little surprised because those sorts of dreams always woke him up too, and her nightmares had actually been getting less intense and less frequent over the past few months as she got more comfortable here.

“El, you know you can always get me up no matter what time it is,” he reminded her.

“You wouldn’t wake up,” she finally answered softly.

“I see,” he sighed. “Well if you have to, you can jump on top of me next time,” he offered with a slight laugh to try to get the kid to look at him. “I don’t want you to sleep on the floor like this.”

Other than a light tap on his shoulder and a few whispers of “Hop,” El hadn’t actually tried very hard to get him up; she had no energy to and so she just curled up on the floor next to his bed instead.

Plus, El was never willing to talk about her dreams anyway. Sometimes she’d ask him to turn on some music or for him to read out loud another a chapter of whatever book they had been reading together. And sometimes they’d just sit in silence together in her bedroom until she drifted back to sleep.

It didn’t really matter what her request was; Hopper had always just agreed to whatever she needed from him when she woke up in the middle of the night like that. He knew she wasn’t just doing it to take advantage of bedtime like other kids sometimes did. After the life she’s had, Hopper always just let her guide him in whatever direction she needed to feel safe. He knew it was an important part of building a relationship that was based on trust; he wanted her to know, *without a doubt*, that she could trust him.

One night, El had scared the absolute shit out of him as every light in the cabin turned on at the same time. When he woke up, she was standing in the middle of the living room, pale and terrified, blood

dripping from her nose. She looked at him with such a panicked expression that he didn't know what else to do besides collect her in his arms, feebly promising to her over and over again that she was safe, that he'd never let anything hurt her ever again. El didn't cry very often, but that night she sobbed so hard against him that she almost couldn't breathe.

They spent the rest of the night on the couch together. El was so terrified that she had curled up in his lap under a blanket making sure that absolutely no part of her body was left exposed, as if whatever horrible monsters she'd seen that night would be able to get to her if she wasn't covered up. Hopper felt nearly sick with helplessness while attempting to hold El together that night. It reminded him of the long nights he spent with Sara towards the end, and nothing could have been more painful than that.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Hopper asked her now anyway. Maybe one of these days she *would* want to talk about it.

"Not a dream," El explained quietly.

"Oh," Hopper replied a bit surprised, his hand moving to brush the hair from her forehead.

The second he touched her far too warm skin, he understood why she had come to him in the middle of the night. She was sick, and he felt even worse knowing she had been sleeping on the cold, hard floor for who knows how long now.

"El, it feels like you have a fever. Do you feel sick?"

She gave a slight nod and closed her eyes. The light was making her head hurt even more, and her nausea seemed to be getting worse by the second too.

"Yeah, okay. Let's get you back to bed," Hopper sighed, trying to help her stand up.

"Sick," El whimpered in warning as her mouth started to water.

"I know. We're going to get you back in bed," he promised, not fully understanding what she had meant.

But El didn't even have time to clarify before she started retching. She tried to make it to the bathroom before making a mess, though she didn't quite get there. Instead, she threw up into her hands in a useless attempt to stop it from getting all over. Hopper heard a splash hit the floor and when he found her in the bathroom, she was already covered in her own vomit.

That's also when he realized this hadn't been the first time she'd gotten sick either. A pair of her pajamas laid on the floor in a crumpled heap next to the sink, where, though she clearly had tried to clean up after herself, she had obviously gotten sick there earlier too.

"Over here," Hopper said, directing her to sit on the floor in front of the toilet. El retched and tears streamed down her cheeks for the next few minutes, while Hopper sat down on the floor next to her. Eventually her tears slowed, and she managed to look down at herself. Her pretty, pink flowered pajamas that she loved so much were covered in wet stains now too. Tears started falling again and she couldn't even wipe them away because her hands were messy too.

"I'm sor-sorry," she cried even harder.

"El, it's okay. Really, it's alright," Hop promised, rubbing a hand against her back, one of the few spots on her clothes that had remained clean. Hopper sat with her for a few minutes until she started to calm down. "Here," he said, standing up to start the water in the shower. "You feel okay to try to get cleaned up real quick?"

El nodded in agreement. She didn't feel much like showering, but she really wanted to be out of her gross, wet clothes. El stood up and rinsed her hands in the water before carefully pulling off her soiled shirt and pj pants, not even caring that Hopper was still in the bathroom with her. She stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain closed.

"Is it okay if I clean up out here while you are in there?" Hopper called to her. Though El never really seemed to mind, he tried to give her as much privacy as was physically possible in the small space that they shared.

“Yes,” he heard her tiny voice answer in reply.

She heard Hopper moving around and then the sound of a spray bottle. El stood under the warm stream of water until she was clean and then sat down in the tub, leaning against the side, trying hard not to throw up again. To her, throwing up was one of the worst feelings in the world, and she especially didn’t want to do it again in the bathtub.

Once the bathroom was clean, Hopper collected the dirty laundry and left it in a basket waiting to be washed. He washed his hands and searched through El’s dresser, finally finding her last clean pair of pajamas. Looks like he was going to have to get to that laundry sooner rather than later.

“All clean in there?” Hopper asked from the other side of the curtain after returning with her clean clothes.

El didn’t answer.

“El, you okay?” he tried again.

Hopper realized now that the pattern of the water falling into the tub hadn’t changed for a few minutes. He pulled the curtain back slightly and peered inside. He found El with her knees curled up to her chest, eyes closed, and head resting on the edge of the bathtub. Her cheeks were a bright pink, and he knew it probably wasn’t the best idea for her to be sitting in a warm tub when she also had a fever, so he reached in and turned the water off.

El woke up with a whine and almost immediately started shivering, though she had no energy to get up to dry off. He found a clean towel and covered her, wrapping her up as best he could as he grabbed her under her arms and lifted her out of the bathtub. He set her feet down on the floor, and she almost instantly curled herself up against him.

“Time to get dressed and get you back to bed,” he suggested softly though El still didn’t move.

“Cold,” she whimpered sadly instead.

"I know, kid. I know," Hopper replied, vigorously rubbing her arms up and down through the towel that was draped around her. "You've got some clean pjs right here, okay?"

"Don't feel good," El only answered in response. She collapsed against his chest, going so nearly limp that he had to wrap his arms around her to hold her up. Her eyes closed again, and he stood holding her dripping wet for a few minutes until it became apparent that he was going to have to help her get dressed or else they may just be there all day.

He adjusted his grip on her so that he was holding her up with one arm, while he reached for her underwear with his other.

"El," he called, rousing her just enough to get her attention.

She opened her eyes and whined.

"Here kid." Hopper held her underwear out for her to step into, bending over so that she could balance herself against his shoulder. Her legs felt like lead as she picked each foot up one at a time, the act almost too much for her exhausted body to handle.

Although El's bare skin under his hands felt like she was on fire, when the towel fell from her shoulders, she started shivering even harder and goosebumps raised on her arms. He quickly ran the towel over her skin once more, drying up the leftover droplets of water before finally helping her into her nightgown. Once she was dressed, he rubbed the towel through her wet hair.

"After we get you back to bed, I'm going to go to the store to get you some medicine," he explained.

Hopper wasn't sure if she was even conscious enough to be paying attention, but she answered with a soft, "uh-huh."

"You want a sip of water or anything before you get in to bed?"

El desperately wanted the rotten taste out her mouth, so she nodded yes. Hopper sat her down on the lid of the toilet and poured a bit of water into the glass that they kept near the bathroom sink.

El took a small drink and almost immediately handed it back to him. The nauseous feeling instantly returned, and she just wanted to lay down and make it all go away.

Hopper poured the rest of the water down the sink and helped El stand up. She leaned against him all the way back to her bedroom. El climbed in bed and immediately grabbed her teddy bear, hugging it tightly in her arms as Hop tucked her back in. He pulled one blanket over her knowing that although she thought she was cold, he actually shouldn't be bundling her up in a bunch of blankets since she was running a fever.

Once he was satisfied that she was comfortable, he asked, "Do you want me to bring the tv in here for your quarantine?"

"Quar-an-tine?" El repeated carefully.

"Yeah, quarantine. It uh, it means that you are kept separate, like all by yourself and away from everyone else for a little while."

"I'm always quarantine," El reminded him softly.

"Yeah," Hopper sighed because he couldn't argue with that statement. "I suppose you sort of already are always in quarantine. Only this, this is a little different." He paused before trying to rephrase the definition. "Actual quarantine is for like when people are sick...They are kept by themselves so that other people don't get sick too. And then the sick people can get better faster because they're getting a lot of rest."

"I don't need tv for quarantine," El replied, rolling over in bed. Her eyes were already closing. "Tired."

"Okay, kid," Hopper answered, rubbing her back. He knew she really must have been feeling poorly to turn down the option of watching tv in bed. "You just get some sleep. I shouldn't be gone for very long, alright?"

El gave a nod and snuggled into her blankets.

Hopper let out a sigh and went into the bathroom to change his clothes and brush his teeth. He quickly combed his hair, thinking he



at least looked put together enough to make a quick run to Big Buy for some medicine and bland food for her.

Bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast.

That's what he remembered the doctors had recommended for Sara when she was constantly nauseous due to her chemotherapy. He was pretty sure there was no way El would eat rice, but he thought he could at least get some applesauce, bananas, and maybe a half slice of toast into her when she felt up to it.

Five minutes into his drive to the store Hopper swore out loud, suddenly remembering that he forgot to bring something back to her bedroom for her to throw up into in case she got sick while he was gone. He just hoped she would stay asleep until he could get back home with some medicine.

Hopper also remembered that he needed to radio into the station to let them know he needed a sick day. Surprisingly, Flo didn't give him too much of a hassle about it. Maybe it's because he actually sounded pretty stressed this time.

He thought about how El had managed to get sick when she didn't even leave the house. He considered that maybe the hamburger in their spaghetti sauce last night was bad, but he had eaten it too and felt alright. The more he thought about it, the more he realized now that she had been acting a little off last night too.

She had pushed around her spaghetti, as if the whole plate had been full of mushy peas that she despised so much. In fact, so much so that he had even accused her of eating too many Eggos for a snack during the day.

"El," he'd said. "How come your not eating?"

She shrugged.

"Did you eat any Eggos today before I got home?"

"No," she promised. "Dinner first." She knew the rules.

But he had thought she looked a little guilty, so he pressed on. "You

do know that I just opened that box of Eggos in there,” he nodded to the freezer. “So there should only be one missing now, right?” She kept quiet and he went on. “So if I look in the freezer and see that more are gone, there’s no one else here that could have eaten them...” he’d told her, hoping to coax the truth out of her.

“Didn’t eat them.”

Hopper walked over to the freezer and pulled the box out anyway. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... eight, nine.” He’d slowed towards the end when he realized she was telling the truth. He narrowed his eyes at her. “So...you just aren’t hungry tonight? I thought you liked spaghetti.”

El shrugged her shoulders again. She wasn’t hungry; she felt *weird*, like her stomach was in her throat, and she was kind of too hot and it felt like her heart was beating a little too fast.

“What did you have for lunch?”

Silence. He stashed the Eggos back in the freezer and rejoined her at the table.

“You did eat lunch, right?”

More silence.

“Kid, if you don’t eat all day, then you’re gonna feel kind of bad by dinner time. You know you have to eat lunch. ”

El nodded and thought that Hopper was probably right about her being extra hungry, so she coaxed herself into eating as much spaghetti as she could so that she didn’t get into even more trouble.

Hopper sighed now when he realized she probably didn’t feel much like eating because she was *sick*. And he was a jerk for making her eat dinner when she’d felt like that.

The drive to the store was a bit slower than he would have liked. It was the beginning of May and it seemed like it had been raining for weeks now. Honestly, the weather seemed to perfectly mimic the shitty mood he’d been in the whole month, so it seemed appropriate.

On top of the rain today, there was also a heavy layer of fog that had been lingering around making visibility incredibly poor.

Once he got to the store, Hopper rushed through the parking lot and grabbed a shopping cart. He picked up a package of saltine crackers, fruit punch flavored Gatorade, and some bananas and applesauce, before finally stopping in the medication aisle.

Hopper was reading the packages of various boxes of children's pain relievers and nausea medication so intently that he hadn't even noticed Joyce standing right next to him with her own cart of groceries.

Tuesday was her only day off and she had just dropped Will off at school. She had just started their weekly shopping trip when she saw Hopper's familiar face. She found it odd that he wasn't dressed in his usual work uniform at this time of day on a Tuesday. Even more odd was the fact that he had been so focused on reading boxes of *children's* medications that he hadn't noticed her when she had been standing just a few feet away from him.

Or maybe he'd seen her just fine and *chose* to ignore her. She'd probably deserved that if that was the case. Ever since the Chicago trip, things between the two of them had been...off. Hopper of course had no idea why but he could only assume that he greatly overstepped the boundaries of their relationship, and he hated to press it any further, so he gave Joyce the extra space she seemed to need and waited for her to make the next move.

She never did.

Therefore, cue the downward spiral of his mood.

Despite the fact that their house was almost totally out of everything with nutritional value, Joyce couldn't help but quietly abandon her cart to follow Jim out of the store after he checked out.

She was too curious, and it almost seemed obvious he'd been hiding something...something that was maybe more than just a side chick. And if he was keeping it from her, then it was most likely something *bad*.

Had Hopper been paying more attention and not preoccupied worrying over El, he would have noticed Joyce's car following behind him; he had always been pretty vigilant with making sure no one ever followed him here.

Hell, he was a damn cop, and he knew better than to get preoccupied when it came to El's safety.

Joyce had sort of just expected to follow him back to his trailer like the nosy and overly paranoid person that she was. She'd been trying her best to get over him, and actually physically seeing him with the other girl surely wasn't going to make that any easier.

Or maybe she was right, and he was about to head up to Hawkins Lab. At least then she would for sure know that something was up. So when Hopper pulled over and parked his Blazer seemingly in the middle of nowhere, she was completely confused and very much concerned. Hopper got out of his vehicle, grocery bag in hand, and started to disappear into the woods. Joyce drove past his Blazer and slowed to park her car in front of it.

If it hadn't been raining so hard, maybe Hop would have heard her footsteps falling not too far behind him, but the sound of the raindrops pelting his hood made that next to impossible. Hopper remained utterly unaware of a single thing being out of place until he was nearly to the porch steps. Joyce also hadn't been paying enough attention to notice the trip wire strung between the trees that Hop had effortlessly avoided, that is, until it was too late and her leg caught it.

As the shotgun rang out, Joyce screamed in surprise, and Hopper dropped his bag to the porch, sprinting back out into the rain towards the intruder that he now realized had obviously been following him. He was in such a panic that he hadn't even recognized who it was until he was nearly tackling her tiny body to the ground.

"Joyce?! Je-sus! How did you--"

"What the hell was that?" she asked, eyes wide and ears still ringing. She struggled against Hopper's arms to free herself from his too tight grip.

“Did you follow me?” he accused, ignoring her question.

“I mean I guess so, yeah,” she confessed, nearly matching his tone with an equal amount of exasperation. “What are you doing out here?” She was practically yelling as the heavy rain was quite loud.

“Damn it, Joyce,” Hopper swore letting go of her arms only to pace the ground in front of her. “You really can’t be here. No one else followed you, did they?” he suddenly worried.

“No. And Jim, calm down! Why would anyone be following me?”

In that moment, someone moving on the porch of the secluded cabin caught her eye. Joyce squinted through the rain to be sure.

“Oh my God. Is that-?” she paused mid sentence, her voice now much softer, and her face looking as if she’d seen a ghost.

Hopper didn’t have to turn around to know what, or more like who, she was referring to. Joyce pushed her way past him to approach the house, Hopper’s arms falling uselessly to his sides knowing there was no point in trying to cover this up any longer.

El had heard the commotion, and though she was sick and Hopper *thought* he had taught her better than to come outside no matter what she’d heard, the noises had concerned her.

Hopper was all she had, and she had to make sure he was safe.

When he turned around, he saw that the kid was standing barefoot on the porch dressed in his cream, long sleeved Henley shirt that he had slept in and abandoned on the bathroom floor after he had changed his clothes earlier that morning. The sleeves pooled at her wrists, and the hem hung to her thighs. Her teddy bear was still clutched in her hand, dangling by her side. She looked between the two adults, obviously confused, before she whispered, “Joyce?”

## 2. Chapter 2

Though El was still feeling absolutely terrible, her lips managed to turn up into a slight smile at seeing Joyce. She had asked Hopper about the nice woman that she met that one night which now seemed like so long ago, almost just as much as she asked about the damn boy.

*But why couldn't she see just her? Joyce was a grown up. She knew how to keep a secret. She knew how to keep kids safe just like he did,* El had often tried to reason with him.

And she hadn't exactly been wrong, but to Hopper, it was all too irresponsible and dangerous, and that's just what he told El every time she'd asked.

"Oh my God," Joyce whispered again, nearly running up the porch steps to the little girl she thought was long gone. "Hey sweetie," she said, instantly taking her in her arms. "Oh honey, I'm sorry. My hands are so cold," she worried when she felt El's warm skin under hers.

El shook her head and took a few steps back towards the door, remembering what Hopper said about getting other people sick.

"I have a fever and I'm in quarantine," El explained.

Suddenly Hopper's purchases were making some sense.

Before Joyce had a chance to say anything more, Hopper was behind them.

"Will both of you *please* get inside," he grumbled, haphazardly stuffing the items back into the spilled grocery bag. He directed them both to the front door and followed them in, quickly closing and locking the door behind them.

Inside, the two girls both stayed quiet. El, mostly because she didn't feel well and she knew Hopper was not happy about her breaking the rules to go outside, and Joyce, because she had so many questions

she didn't even know where to begin.

Hopper took his wet jacket off and paced the floor for a moment before sitting down at the table. "Come 'ere, kid," he finally said. He motioned for El to join him as he dug through the grocery bag, pulling out the new digital thermometer he bought. It was obvious she had a fever, but he wanted to see exactly how bad it was.

El sat down on his knee and grabbed the thermometer from his hand. She immediately stuck it under her tongue, indicating that she was no stranger to having her temperature taken.

Joyce approached the two of them and sat down in the opposite chair at the table. She looked to him worriedly.

"I think it's just the stomach flu," he explained simply to her unspoken question.

The thermometer beeped, and El pulled it out of her mouth handing it to Hopper.

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Again, he rummaged through the bag and pulled out the bottle of anti-nausea medication. He tore the box open and poured a dose of the grape liquid in the accompanying plastic cup before handing it to El.

"This is going to help your belly," he promised.

El swallowed the whole thing without question and handed it back to him. She did the same with the pain reliever and fever reducer that he offered, Hopper not even considering the fact that he should have given the nausea medication a little time to work before asking her sensitive stomach to hold down too much.

"Okay. It's time for you to get back into bed," Hopper said to El once she was thoroughly medicated.

Instead of climbing off his lap, she shook her head no and turned to face him in the chair. She adjusted her legs so that they were hanging off the sides of his lap and hugged her arms around him. She nuzzled

her face flat against his chest with a quiet whine and tightly gripped the sides of his shirt in her hands. Hopper's hands instinctively went up to her back to hold her close to him, and she relaxed a little in his arms.

He realized how awful she must have been feeling to be acting out this way, silently asking for physical comfort, something that she so rarely did.

Even though Joyce was here, and he really needed to have a private conversation with her, he knew that it would have to wait a few minutes. He didn't have the heart to force El back into her bed just yet.

Hopper sighed and ran a hand slowly up and down El's back, her eyes almost immediately closing despite how badly she was trying to stay awake.

"How long have you two been..." Joyce began.

"December," he answered before she'd even finished, still feeling a little pissed off at himself for allowing this all to happen.

Truly, his anger was half-hearted. It felt like such a huge relief having Joyce sitting across from him right now. Sometimes he wasn't sure if he was raising this kid right and having another person, particularly a woman that El trusted, would certainly be a nice change.

"God, Jim. Just..." Joyce sighed, trying hard to phrase her statement in a way that wouldn't make El feel like she was a burden to either of them. "Do you need help with anything? Like clothes for her...or just *anything*?" Joyce offered quietly.

Hopper shook his head and looked down at El dressed only in his far too large pajama shirt. He could see why Joyce may be asking that question.

"Did you get sick on your clothes again?" Hopper softly asked the near sleeping child.

El forced her head up and looked up at him with a nod. "Sorry," she whispered.



"It's okay, kid," he promised. El laid her head back down against him with an exhausted sigh. "Yeah...her aim's not very great," he explained to Joyce, finally breaking down with a small laugh. "I think we've just about gone through all of her pajamas in one night."

"Yes. They're all dirty," El mumbled and nodded in agreement from his arms.

Joyce laughed too, relieved to hear that El actually did have some clothes of her own.

*Jesus*, of course she did. The two of them had been living together for the better part of four...five?...months now without any help. And Hopper obviously did not need her help now.

"Not sure how she really got sick when I don't even let her leave the house," Hopper sighed out loud.

"She's just a kid, Hop. They all get stomach bugs like this every so often," Joyce reassured him, as she recognized what sounded like guilt in his tone.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess."

El suddenly sat up and pulled back from Hopper.

"Are you going to get sick too? I'm supposed to be quarantined," she worried, her eyebrows pulling together with concern.

"No, kid. I'll be alright. It's probably all just germs that I've already had at some point in my life. Adults aren't as susceptible to these sorts of things," he explained.

El wasn't exactly sure what all that meant, but she felt too tired to ask him to elaborate. She simply nodded and laid her head back down, relieved to hear that she wasn't going to make the adults sick too. It was only a few moments later when she gave one last sigh. Her breathing softened, and she drifted off to sleep.

Now that Hopper knew he could freely talk with Joyce, he let out a deep sigh too...Not that he knew what he was going to say anyway...

“Jim,” Joyce urged when he didn’t start talking. Hopper thought about how it somehow always sounded so much more important when she used his first name. “Why didn’t you tell me? You *know* you could have told me.” He could hear the hurt in her voice.

He quickly glanced at her and then back down to the table, sort of glad to have El in his arms, as it gave his anxious hands something to do.

“Joyce, it-“ He paused. “It just wasn’t that simple.”

“What do you mean not that simple?” she asked. “You could have just said one day, ‘Hey, remember that telekinetic little girl we all thought had died? Well yeah, she’s actually okay and I’m sort of taking care of her now,’” Joyce continued, her tone tapering off to a hushed whisper at the end as she realized she was getting a little too loud.

Had *this* been the secret girl all along?

Hopper sighed again. “It’s dangerous for anyone to know about her. Dangerous for you, dangerous for her,” he attempted to explain.

Hopper probably wasn’t wrong about it being dangerous. Eleven was all those men really seemed to care about finding that night at the Lab.

“How did you even find her?” Joyce asked, changing the subject; she had so many questions.

Another sigh. “Jack came into the station and said that some little girl assaulted him in the woods...levitated and pitched a flaming squirrel at his face and stole his coat and hat,” Hopper revealed, not able to hold back a laugh over the ridiculous story. Of course, Hopper had actually secretly believed him, but thank God, no one else really did. Just another one of the old guy’s drunken delusions, they all thought.

“Seriously?” Joyce smiled.

“Figured it had to be her, so I started leaving some food out near where it happened like a damn lost cat or something,” he explained,

remembering how hard those days were knowing that she was outside in that horrible weather on her own. "I just didn't know how else to tell her that I could help her, you know?"

Joyce nodded and he continued.

"One night as I was walking back to the truck, I heard footsteps behind me, and then there she was. Half-frozen. Starving. Dirty head to toe, and still wearing the same damn clothes from that night at the school."

"You said December. How long had she been out there?"

"Couple of weeks."

Joyce shook her head and covered her mouth, trying to imagine the tiny girl who was now curled up so small against Hopper's chest, living out in the woods on her own for that long.

Hopper understood. "I mean, don't let this fool you," he chuckled, gesturing to El sleeping innocently in his arms. "The kid is tough. She's smart and damn resourceful too. Plus, she's got a bit of a stubborn streak which I don't think really hurt her out there either."

"Yeah, but Hop, she's still just a little girl. She's what, like 12, 13?"

"Yeah," he agreed with a sigh.

And despite her age and survival skills, in their first few weeks together, he was often reminded about how sheltered and horrible her upbringing had been. There were major gaps in her knowledge and a lot of social cues she had to learn.

"How have things been going?" Joyce asked, understanding the underlying context of that last sigh.

"Good, she's uh, she's really come a long way already. Quick learner. The kid didn't even know how to use a broom and dustpan," he added with a short laugh. "I mean, I can tell she's getting antsy... bored. Can't really blame her though," he shrugged and shifted in the chair. "She just wants answers, you know, something definitive to look forward to, and I can't give her that. At least, not yet."

“She seems very comfortable with you,” Joyce gestured with a soft smile at the two of them.

“Oh, uh, yeah. I guess so,” Hopper replied, his arms tightening a little around her when he realized Joyce was right. “But this isn’t exactly normal for her,” he added. “She’s generally not a super, uh, affectionate or needy kid,” Hopper excused, trying to search for the right word to describe El. “I think she just feels that incredibly shitty today.”

“I don’t know,” Joyce disagreed, shaking her head. “It seems like she really trusts you.”

It didn’t matter how much Hopper tried to make excuses. It was obvious to Joyce that he and El had developed a close relationship and bond with each other already. The kid in front of her had clearly made drastic improvements in the few months that they’d lived together. She didn’t shy away from physical contact or conversation, and her vocabulary had greatly improved. It warmed her heart to see El actually able to feel comfortable with another person. An adult, nonetheless, since she had always seemed relatively at ease around the other kids.

It was also remarkably unusual seeing Hopper, a man not exactly known for his tender, caring side, act so natural with a tiny girl enveloped in his arms. Jim had lived in New York the entire time he had a family, so for many people in Hawkins, Jim Hopper- the family man and father- was not a side of him that they were familiar with. And for him, during a time in his life when he desperately needed to not be reminded of that, it was a lot easier that way. But for Joyce, she had a reminder of what a great dad Hopper was during that one weekend she spent with him; seeing how great he was with her son may have partly been why she let herself fall so carelessly hard for him.

“So you live here with her then?” Joyce asked, looking around the homey cabin.

“Yeah. It’s not much, but it works,” he shrugged again.

“No, it’s nice,” Joyce smiled across the table to him. And suddenly

she couldn't take it anymore. She *had* to ask. "When we went to Chicago, did you..."

El suddenly shifted in Hopper's arms, tucking her hands up between their bodies and quietly whining in attempt to find a comfortable spot. Joyce noted how the pink flush to El's cheeks had gone rather pale as the kid stirred uncomfortably. Before Hopper even had a chance to ask what Joyce was doing, El was pushing herself up off his lap, and somehow, Joyce was already there in front of her with the kitchen trash can.

El gagged and almost immediately threw up all the grape flavored medicine in her stomach. She continued vomiting until there was absolutely nothing left at all, not even bile, though her stomach kept spasming painfully. It was almost worse now because her body was still going through all the motions even though nothing was coming up.

"Am...I...dying?" she hiccupped when she could finally catch her breath enough to speak.

"No, baby, no," Joyce immediately promised rubbing her back gently.

"It hurts," El cried, clutching her stomach tightly.

"I know," Hopper sighed right along with her. He *was* a little concerned that El couldn't even keep a few tablespoons of medicine down. "You've just gotta get some rest," Hopper finally said when he felt fairly certain she had nothing left.

El collapsed her exhausted body back against him. Hopper slid his arms under her thighs and lifted her up, carrying her the way a parent would carry a much smaller toddler. El's weak arms wrapped under his, and she instantly laid her head back down on his shoulder. The heat from her body radiated through their clothes, though she was trembling ever so slightly.

Joyce watched Hopper carry El to what she assumed was her bedroom, though they were both quickly back in the main living area again. When Hopper had adjusted El in his arms to pull back the blankets on her bed, he found out why she had changed her clothes

again; she'd gotten sick in bed while he was gone.

Joyce silently questioned his reappearance.

"Apparently I need to do a little clean up in there first," he nodded to El's bedroom.

"Oh, I can do that," Joyce offered; after all he's done for her and Will, this was really the least she could offer.

"You don't need to-" Hopper said, though Joyce was already in the kid's bedroom.

Hopper attempted to lay El down in his bed, but she started crying and clung to him tighter.

"Okay. It's okay. I got you. It's okay," he promised, sitting down on his bed with her instead.

He'd unfortunately had a lot of practice caring for, and comforting, a sick child. But that didn't make it any easier listening to El cry out in discomfort.

Having raised two little boys, Joyce wasn't squeamish or unfamiliar with sicknesses either. She removed all of El's bedding and remade her bed with blankets that she found on a rack in the corner of her bedroom. This appeared to be the only bedroom in the cabin, and she wondered where Hopper slept. Surely, not on the tiny bed that was out in the living room.

When Joyce reappeared, she found Hopper sitting on the small bed, his back leaned against the wall. El was wrapped in his arms on his lap, her chest pressed against his and her face snuggled up against his neck.

"Her bed's ready if you want to lay her down," she said softly approaching them.

Hopper nodded. "Thanks," he replied, though he didn't immediately move to get up. He sensed El didn't want him to leave her, and honestly, he couldn't bring himself to when she was feeling this bad.

“Bear?” El looked up at him and sniffled.

“Oh, uh...” Hopper said looking around.

Joyce spotted the stuffed bear that El had been holding earlier now on the floor near the table.

“Here sweetie,” she said bringing it back over.

El wrapped it tightly in her arms and snuggled back up against Hopper, her eyelids growing heavier and heavier.

The two adults were both quiet for a minute until El suddenly opened her eyes. “Please don’t go, okay?” she sleepily requested looking to Joyce.

“Kid, Joyce is going to have to leave at some point. She has her own kids to take care of,” Hopper reminded her quietly.

“Just...don’t go while I’m sleeping?” El whispered, her eyes already closing again.

“Don’t worry. I’ll wake you up to say goodbye, okay?”

El was barely able to give a nod before sleep took over.

“Guess I’m not going anywhere for a little while either,” Hopper laughed lightly.

Joyce sat down on the arm of the couch across from them. “Hop, I really am sorry about following you. I know that I shouldn’t have, and I hate thinking that I could have put you guys in danger.”

“Joyce, don’t. It’s fine, really. I just overreacted. It’s uh, actually sort of nice having someone else here.” He briefly glanced at her and then away again wondering if she caught that he meant it was nice having *her* here. El wasn’t the only one who craved having Joyce around.

The two adults softly made plans for occasional weekday visits and discussed how else she could be of help to them. Hopper mostly promised that they were doing okay though he did readily accept Joyce’s offers of bringing over some of her kids’ old board games that

they no longer played. She also offered to stop at the library each week to bring El some new books. El would definitely enjoy all that, but Hopper knew she would be most excited about having Joyce's company for a few hours. And honestly, he was too, even though he definitely didn't want a repeat of what had happened in Chicago to happen again, especially now that El's feelings were involved. He could handle Joyce backing off from him like she'd done, but if she suddenly disappeared from El's life now too, the kid would be more than devastated.

The two discussed nothing particularly heavy for the next 20 minutes, neither having the courage to bring anything serious up right now, just being overwhelmed enough at the whole situation.

"God, she's really warm," Hop eventually sighed, his hand attempting to brush some of El's wet, matted hair off her forehead. Hopper attempted to shift her slightly away from his body.

The bit of movement unintentionally woke El up, and she sat up, looking between Joyce and Hopper with a quizzical expression.

"El, you need to go lay down in your own bed now to rest, okay?"

"Slept a long time already," El argued.

"No, not really. It's been like 20 minutes," Hopper informed her.

El frowned. It certainly felt like she'd been asleep for a lot longer than that.

"Married?" She asked suddenly, grabbing Hopper's hand, lifting it up to look for a ring on his finger.

"What?"

El glanced at Joyce's hand. "You and Joyce. Married?"

"Uh..." Hopper looked to Joyce who appeared just as confused. "I guess so. We've both been married before, yeah," he confirmed.

"No," El urged. "With each other." She continued looking back and forth between the two.



“Uh no, kid,” he corrected quickly. “No. We were married to different people, not to each other.”

“I saw you,” El argued, confused.

“I think you were just having a dream,” Hopper realized.

“Felt real,” she frowned again.

“Probably just a fever dream.”

*But why in the hell would the kid be having fever dreams of them getting married?*

El let out a frustrated sigh and frowned.

“Sometimes when you have a fever, you might have some vivid and pretty weird dreams,” he elaborated at her confusion.

El didn’t have the energy to argue any further and laid back down. Even though she had been asleep and it being just a dream like Hopper said seemed like a plausible explanation, she felt almost positive that what she saw in her head was not just a dream.

...but then again, she was feeling very sick and maybe Hopper was right; maybe she had just wished *really, really* hard that it wasn’t only a dream so that she could be like all the other kids who had both a mom and a dad.